

2. God is the first beginning of all things, but the beginning seems to be imperfect (as a seed is less perfect than a plant).

Reply: A seed seems imperfect because its potential to become something else has not yet been fully realized (or actualized). However, a seed owes its origin to a germinating plant. Therefore, a beginning cannot be truly afforded to a seed. In a more general sense, any potential being owes its existence to an actual being since only a potential being can be reduced into act by some being already actual. Since God is completely actual he represents no potential and can be properly referred to as perfect.

3. God's essence is existence, but existence seems most imperfect because it is most universal and receptive of all modification. Therefore God is imperfect.

Reply: Existence is the most perfect of all things because it implies actuality. Nothing has actuality insofar as it exists and hence existence is that which actuates all things. Because pure existence is pure actuality (and not potential), it is incorrect to say that existence is receptive of all modification. The confusion in the objection lies in the fact that existence should be viewed as something received and not as that which exists. For example, a horse is not existence that has been modified. Rather, a horse is a potential that has received actuality (existence).

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Catholic Philosophy - Part 10 - God is Perfect



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Catholic Teaching:

God is absolutely perfect in the order of all things. God is perfectly just, merciful, powerful, wise, and loving. He does not lack any perfection found in the created order because he is the first efficient cause and creates all perfection. God's perfection is grounded in the fact that he is synonymous with existence itself and thus encompasses all being.

The Scholastics realized that since God is the first efficient cause and exists in complete actuality there can be found nothing wanting in him. Since God has no potentiality he encompasses all that is. Essentially, being is synonymous with goodness in the eyes of the Scholastics, and God, as absolute being, is also absolute goodness. Now it might seem strange that goodness is synonymous with being, but one must realize that perfection is impossible without existence. A perfect being is one that exists fully realized and actualized with no deficiencies. Deficiencies cannot exist in a perfectly actual being and thus God is perfect.

Definition of the Dogma:

The First Vatican Council explicitly taught the dogma of the perfection of God. Additionally, the doctrine is based on Matthew 5:48, "be you perfect as also your heavenly Father is perfect." The doctrine is a De Fide dogma of the faith and must be believed with divine and Catholic Faith.

Heresies which reject or confuse this teaching:

There is no single heresy that directly challenges this dogma, however there are many heresies that indirectly and inadvertently teach doctrines contrary to God's perfection. Such heresies do this by teaching doctrines that compromise God's actuality. Anthropomorphists do this by positing the teaching that God has a body (and thus potential).

Pantheists believe nature has a share in God's divinity and therefore compromise God's actuality. Catharists, Gnostics, and other dualists believe in the existence of two gods: one good and one evil. They fail realize that a pure evil spirit is not possible since it would have no actuality; in this sense they confuse the teaching of perfection in God. Any heresy that confuses Christ's nature also confuses the doctrine of God's perfection. Thus Arianism, Nestorianism and Monophysitism offend this dogma.

Philosophical Proof from St. Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologica

Primary Argument:

P1. A thing is perfect in proportion to its actuality.

P2. God is entirely actual and has no potential.

C1. God is absolutely perfect.

Objections:

1. A thing is perfect if it is perfectly made, but God is not made. Hence God is not perfect.

Reply: There are two senses of the word "perfect". In the first sense (as applicable to created things) a created thing is said to be perfect if there is nothing wanting in its actuality. Hence a chair is "perfect" if it fully realizes its utilitarian potential, but the chair still has potential within its nature. It can be destroyed, broken or converted into something else. In this sense it does not have "perfection" in the second more universal sense: it does not have complete actuality. It is in the second sense of the word "perfect" that we refer to God, hence the first, more restricted sense has no bearing on the matter.